10

Francis Newton Esqr

from the Author

A

DISCOURSE, &c.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED TO THE

STUDENTS

OF THE

ROYAL ACADEMY

ON THE

Distribution of the Prizes, *December* 10, 1782,

BY THE

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BRITISH MUSEUM

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DISCOURSE, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

THE higheſt ambition of every Artiſt is to be thought a Man of Genius. As long as this flattering quality is joined to his name, he can bear with patience the imputation of careleſſneſs, incorrectneſs, or defects of whatever kind.

So far indeed is the preſence of Genius from implying an abſence of faults, that they are conſidered by many as inſeparable companions. Some go ſuch lengths as

to take indications from them, and not only excuſe faults on account of Genius, but they preſume Genius from the exiſtence of certain faults.

It is certainly true, that a work may juſtly claim the character of Genius though full of errors; and it is equally true, that it may be faultleſs, and yet not exhibit the leaſt ſpark of Genius. This naturally ſuggeſts an enquiry, a deſire at leaſt of enquiring, what qualities of a work and of a workman may juſtly intitle a Painter to that character?

I have in a former diſcourſe * endeavoured to impreſs you with a fixed opinion, that a comprehenſive and critical knowledge of the works of nature is the only ſource of Beauty and Grandeur. But when we ſpeak to Painters we muſt always conſider this rule, and all rules, with a reference to the mechanical practice of their own particular Art. It is not properly in the learning, the taſte, and the dignity of the ideas, that Genius appears as belonging to a Painter. There is a Genius particular and appropriated in his own trade, (as I may call it) diſtinguiſhed from all others. For that power, which enables the Artiſt to conceive his ſubject with dignity, may be ſaid to

* Diſcourſe III.

to belong to general education; and is as much the Genius of a Poet, or the profeſſor of any other liberal Art, or even of a good Critic in any of thoſe arts, as of a Painter. Whatever ſublime ideas may fill his mind, he is a Painter only as he can put in practice what he knows, and communicate thoſe ideas by viſible repreſentation.

If my expreſſion can convey my idea, I wiſh to diſtinguiſh excellence of this kind by calling it the Genius of mechanical performance. This Genius conſiſts, I conceive, in the power of expreſſing that which employs your pencil, whatever it may be, *as a whole*; ſo as that the general effect and power of the whole may take poſſeſſion of the mind, and for a while ſuſpend the conſideration of the ſubordinate and particular beauties or defects.

The advantage of this method of conſidering objects, is what I wiſh now more particularly to enforce. At the ſame time I do not forget, that a Painter muſt have the power of contracting as well as dilating his ſight; becauſe, he that does not at all expreſs particulars, expreſſes nothing; yet it is certain, that a nice diſcrimination of minute circumſtances, and a punctilious delineation of them, whatever excellence it may have, (and I do not mean

mean to detract from it) never did confer on the Artiſt the character of Genius.

Besides thoſe minute differences in things which are frequently not obſerved at all, and when they are make little impreſſion, there are in all conſiderable objects great characteriſtic diſtinctions, which preſs ſtrongly on the ſenſes, and therefore fix the imagination.

These are by no means, as ſome people think, an aggregate of all the ſmall diſcriminating particulars; nor will ſuch an accumulation of particulars ever expreſs them. Theſe anſwer to what I have heard great lawyers call the leading points in a caſe, or the leading caſes relative to theſe points.

The detail of particulars, which does not aſſiſt the expreſſion of the main characteriſtic, is worſe than uſeleſs, it is miſchievous, as it diſſipates the attention, and draws it from the principal point. It may be remarked, that the impreſſion which is left on our mind, even of things which are familiar to us, is ſeldom more than their general effect; beyond which we do not look in recogniſing ſuch objects.

To expreſs this in Painting, is to expreſs what is congenial and natural to the mind of man, and what gives him by reflexion his own mode of conceiving. The other preſuppoſes *nicety* and *reſearch*, which are only the buſineſs of the curious and attentive, and therefore does not ſpeak to the general ſenſe of the whole ſpecies; in which common, and, as I may ſo call it, mother tongue, every thing grand and comprehenſive muſt be uttered.

I DO not mean to preſcribe what degree of attention ought to be paid to the minute parts; this it is hard to ſettle. We are ſure that it is expreſſing the general effect of the whole which can give to objects their true and touching character; and wherever this is obſerved, whatever is neglected, we acknowledge the hand of a Maſter. We may even go farther and obſerve, that when the general effect *only* is preſented to us by a ſkillful hand, it appears to expreſs that object in a more lively manner than the minuteſt reſemblance would do.

THESE obſervations may lead to very deep queſtions, which I do not mean here to diſcuſs; among others, it may lead to an enquiry, Why we are not always pleaſed with the moſt abſolute poſſible reſemblance of an imitation to its original object? Caſes may exiſt in which ſuch

a reſemblance may be even diſagreeable. I ſhall only obſerve that the effect of figures in Wax-work, though certainly a more exact repreſentation than can be given by Painting or Sculpture, is a ſufficient proof that the pleaſure we receive from imitation is not increaſed merely in proportion as it approaches to minute and detailed reality; we are pleaſed, on the contrary, by ſeeing ends anſwered by ſeeming inadequate means.

To expreſs protuberance by actual relief, to expreſs the ſoftneſs of fleſh by the ſoftneſs of wax, ſeems rude and inartificial, and creates no grateful ſurprize. But to expreſs diſtances on a plain ſurface, ſoftneſs by hard bodies, and particular colouring by materials which are not ſingly of that colour, produces that magic which is the pride and triumph of art.

Carry this principle a ſtep further. Suppoſe the effect of imitation to be fully compaſſed by means ſtill more inadequate; let the power of a few well-choſen ſtrokes, which ſuperſede labour by judgment and direction, produce a complete impreſſion of all that the mind demands in an object; we are charmed with ſuch an unexpected happineſs, and begin to be tired with the ſuperfluous diligence,

diligence, which in vain ſollicits an appetite already ſatiated.

THE properties of all objects, as far as a Painter is concerned with them, are, the outline or drawing, the colour, and the light and ſhade. The drawing gives the form, the colour its viſible quality, and the light and ſhade its ſolidity.

EXCELLENCE in any one of theſe parts of art will never be acquired by an Artiſt, unleſs he has the habit of looking upon objects at large, and obſerving the effect which they have on the eye when it is dilated, and employed upon the whole, without ſeeing any one of the parts diſtinctly. It is by this that we obtain the ruling characteriſtic, and that we learn to imitate it by ſhort and dexterous methods. I do not mean by dexterity a trick or mechanical habit, formed by gueſs, and eſtabliſhed by cuſtom; but that ſcience, which, by a profound knowledge of ends and means, diſcovers the ſhorteſt and ſureſt way to its own purpoſe.

IF we examine with a critical view the manner of thoſe Artiſts whom we conſider as patterns, we ſhall find that their great fame does not proceed from their works being more

more highly finiſhed, or from a more minute attention to details, but from that enlarged comprehenſion which ſees the whole object at once, and that energy of art which gives its characteriſtic effect by adequate expreſſion.

Raffaelle and Titian are two names which ſtand the higheſt in our art; one for Drawing, the other for Painting. The moſt conſiderable and the moſt eſteemed works of Raffaelle are the Cartoons, and his Freſco works in the Vatican; thoſe, as we all know, are far from being minutely finiſhed; his principal care and attention ſeems to be fixed upon the adjuſtment of the whole, whether it was the general compoſition, or the compoſition of each individual figure; for every figure may be ſaid to be a leſſer whole, though in regard to the general work to which it belongs, it is but a part; the ſame may be ſaid of the head, of the hands, or feet. Though he poſſeſſed this art of ſeeing and comprehending the whole, as far as form is concerned, he did not exert the ſame faculty in regard to the general effect, which is preſented to the eye by colour, and light, and ſhade. Of this the deficiency of his oil pictures, where this excellence is more expected than in Freſco, is a ſufficient proof.

It is to Titian we muſt turn our eyes to find excellence with regard to colour, and light and ſhade, in the higheſt degree. He was both the firſt and the greateſt maſter of this Art. By a few ſtrokes he knew how to mark the general image and character of whatever object he attempted, and produced, by this alone, a truer repreſentation than his maſter Giam: Bellino, or any of his predeceſſors, who finiſhed every hair. His great care was to expreſs the general colour, to preſerve the maſſes of light and ſhade, and to give by oppoſition the idea of that ſolidity which is inſeparable from natural objects. When thoſe are preſerved, though with nothing more, the work will have in a proper place its compleat effect; but where any of theſe are wanting, however minutely laboured the picture may be in the detail, the whole will have a falſe and even an unfiniſhed appearance, at whatever diſtance, or in whatever light, it can be ſhewn.

It is vain to attend to the variation of tints, if, in that attention, the general hue of fleſh is loſt; or to finiſh ever ſo minutely the parts, if the maſſes are not obſerved, or the whole not well put together.

Vasari ſeems to have no great diſpoſition to favour the Venetian Painters, yet he every where juſtly com-

mends *il modo di fare, la maniera, la bella pratica*; that is, the admirable manner and practice of that ſchool. On Titian, in particular, he beſtows the epithets of *giudicioſo bello, e ſtupendo.*

THIS manner was then new to the world, but that unſhaken truth on which it is founded, has fixed it as a model to all ſucceeding Painters; and thoſe who will examine into the artifice, will find it to conſiſt in the power of generaliſing, and in the ſhortneſs and ſimplicity of the means.

MANY Artiſts, as Vaſari likewiſe obſerves, have ignorantly imagined they are imitating the manner of Titian when they leave their colours rough and neglect the detail; but, not poſſeſſing the principles on which he wrought, they have produced what he calls *goffe pitture*, abſurd fooliſh pictures; for ſuch will always be the conſequence of affecting dexterity without ſcience, without ſelection, and without fixed principles.

RAFFAELLE and Titian ſeemed to look at nature for different purpoſes; they both had the power of extending their view to the whole; but one looked only for the general effect as produced by form, the other as by colour.

We cannot entirely refuſe to Titian the merit of attending to the general *form* of his object, as well as colour; but his deficiency lay, a deficiency at leaſt when he is compared with Raffaelle, in not poſſeſſing the power, like him, of correcting the form of his model by any general idea of beauty in his own mind. Of this his St. Sebaſtian is a particular inſtance. This figure appears to be a moſt exact repreſentation both of the form and of the colour of the model, which he then happened to have before him; it has all the force of nature, and the colouring is fleſh itſelf; but, unluckily, the model was of a bad form, eſpecially the legs. Titian has with as much care preſerved theſe defects, as he has imitated the beauty and brilliancy of the colouring. In his colouring he was large and general, as in his deſign he was minute and partial; in the one he was a Genius, in the other not much above a copier. I do not, however, ſpeak now of all his pictures; inſtances enough may be produced in his works, where thoſe obſervations on his defects could not with any propriety be applied; but it is in the *manner*, or language, as it may be called, in which Titian, and others of that ſchool, expreſs themſelves, that their chief excellence lies. This manner is in reality, in Painting, what language is in Poetry; we are all ſenſible how differently the imagination is affected by the ſame ſentiment

expreſſed

expreſſed in different words, and how mean or how grand the ſame object appears when preſented to us by different Painters. Whether it is the human figure, an animal, or even inanimate objects, there is nothing, however unpromiſing in appearance, but what may be raiſed into dignity, convey ſentiment, and produce emotion, in the hands of a Painter of genius. What was ſaid of Virgil, that he threw even the dung about the ground with an air of dignity, may be applied to Titian. Whatever he touched, however naturally mean and habitually familiar, by a kind of magic he inveſted with grandeur and importance.

I MUST here obſerve, that I am not recommending a neglect of the detail; indeed it would be difficult, if not impoſſible, to preſcribe *certain* bounds, and tell how far, or when it is to be obſerved or neglected; much muſt, at laſt, be left to the taſte and judgment of the Artiſt. I am well aware how a judicious detail will ſometimes give the force of truth to the work, and conſequently intereſt the ſpectator.* I only wiſh to impreſs on your minds the true diſtinction between eſſential and ſubordinate powers, and ſhew what qualities in the art claim your *chief* attention, and what may, with the leaſt injury to your reputation,

* See Diſcourſe III, page 105.

tation, be neglected; ſomething, perhaps, always muſt be neglected; the leſſer ought then to give way to the greater, and ſince every work can have but a limited time allotted to it, for even ſuppoſing a whole life to be employed about one picture, it is ſtill limited; it appears more reaſonable to employ that time to the beſt advantage, in contriving various methods of compoſing the work; of trying different effects of light and ſhade; and employing the labour of correction, in heightening by a judicious adjuſtment of the parts the effects of the whole, than that the time ſhould be taken up in minutely finiſhing thoſe parts.

But there is another kind of high finiſhing which may ſafely be condemned, as it ſeems to counteract its own purpoſe; that is, when the artiſt, to avoid that hardneſs which proceeds from the outline cutting againſt the ground, ſoftens and blends the colours to exceſs; this is what the ignorant call high finiſhing, but which tends to deſtroy the brilliancy of colour, and the true effect of repreſentation, which conſiſts very much in preſerving the ſame proportion of ſharpneſs and bluntneſs which is in natural objects. This extreme ſoftning, inſtead of producing the effect of ſoftneſs, gives the appearance of ivory, or ſome other hard ſubſtance, highly poliſhed.

THE portraits of Cornelius Johnſon appear to have this defect, and conſequently want that ſuppleneſs which is the characteriſtic of fleſh; whereas, in the works of Vandyke we may obſerve that true mixture of ſoftneſs and hardneſs perfectly obſerved. The ſame defect is in the manner of Vanderwerf, in oppoſition to that of Teniers; and ſuch we may add is the manner of Raffelle in his oil pictures, in compariſon with that of Titian.

THE name which Raffaelle has ſo juſtly maintained as the firſt of Painters, we may venture to ſay was not acquired by this laborious attention. His apology may be made by ſaying that it was the manner of his country; but if he had expreſſed his ideas with the facility and eloquence, as it may be called, of Titian, his works would certainly not have been leſs excellent; and that praiſe, which ages and nations have poured out upon his works, for poſſeſſing Genius in the higher attainments of art, would have been extended to them all.

THOSE who are not converſant in works of art, are often ſurprized at the high value ſet by connoiſſeurs on drawings which appear careleſs, and in every reſpect unfiniſhed; but they are truly valuable, and their value ariſes from this, that they give the idea of a whole, and this

this whole is often expreſſed by a dexterous facility which indicates the true power of a Painter, even though roughly exerted; whether it conſiſts in the general compoſition, or the general form of each figure, or in the turn of the attitude which beſtows grace and elegance. All this we may ſee fully exemplified in the very ſkilful drawings of Parmegiano and Corregio. On whatever account we value theſe drawings, it is certainly not for high finiſhing, or a minute attention to particulars.

EXCELLENCE in every part, and in every province of our art, from the higheſt ſtile of hiſtory down to the reſemblances of ſtill-life, will depend on this power of extending the attention at once to the whole, without which the greateſt diligence is vain.

I WISH you to bear in mind, that when I ſpeak of a *whole*, I do not mean ſimply an *whole* as belonging to compoſition, but an *whole* with reſpect to the general ſtyle of colouring; an *whole* with regard to the light and ſhade; an *whole* of every thing which may ſeparately become the main purpoſe of a Painter.

I remember a Landſcape-Painter in Rome, who was known by the name of Studio, from his patience in high finiſhing, in which he thought the whole excellence of art conſiſted; ſo that he once endeavoured, as he ſaid, to repreſent every individual leaf on a tree. This picture I never ſaw, but I am very ſure that an artiſt, who looked only at the general character of the ſpecies, the order of the branches, and the maſſes of the foliage, would in a few minutes produce a more true reſemblance of trees, than this Painter in as many months.

A Landſcape-Painter certainly ought to ſtudy anatomically (if I may uſe the expreſſion) all the objects which he paints; but when he is to turn his ſtudies to uſe, his ſkill, as a man of Genius, will be diſplayed in ſhewing the general effect, preſerving the ſame degree of hardneſs and ſoftneſs as the objects have in nature; for he applies himſelf to the imagination, not to the curioſity, and works not for the Virtuoſo or the Naturaliſt, but for the common obſerver of life and nature. When he knows his ſubject, he will know not only what to deſcribe, but what to omit; and this ſkill in leaving out, in all things, is a great part of knowledge and wiſdom.

The ſame excellence of manner which Titian diſplayed in Hiſtory or Portrait-painting, is equally conſpicuous in his Landſcapes, whether they are profeſſedly ſuch, or ſerve only as back-grounds. One of the moſt eminent of this latter kind is to be found in the picture of St. Pietro Martire. The large trees, which are here introduced, are plainly diſtinguiſhed from each other by the different manner with which the branches ſhoot from their trunks, as well as by their different foliage; and the weeds in the fore-ground are varied in the ſame manner, juſt as much as variety requires, and no more. When Algerotti, ſpeaking of this picture, praiſes it for the minute diſcriminations of the leaves and plants, even, as he ſays, to excite the admiration of a Botaniſt, his intention was undoubtedly to give praiſe even at the expence of truth; for he muſt have known, that this is not the character of the picture; but Connoiſſeurs will always find in pictures what they think they ought to find; he was not aware that he was giving a deſcription injurious to the reputation of Titian.

Such accounts may be very hurtful to young artiſts, who never have had an opportunity of ſeeing the

work deſcribed ; and they may poſſibly conclude, that this great Artiſt acquired the name of the Divine Titian from his eminent attention to ſuch trifling circumſtances, which, in reality, would not raiſe him above the level of the moſt ordinary Painter.

We may extend theſe obſervations even to what ſeems to have but a ſingle, and that an individual, object. The excellence of Portrait-painting, and we may add even the likeneſs, the character, and countenance, as I have obſerved in another place, depends more upon the general effect exhibited by the painter, than the exact expreſſion of the peculiarities, or minute diſcriminations of the parts. The chief attention of the artiſt is therefore imployed in planting the features in their proper places, which ſo much contributes to giving the effect and true impreſſion of the whole. The very peculiarities may be reduced to claſſes and general deſcriptions, and there are therefore large ideas to be found even in this contracted ſubject. He may afterwards labour ſingle features to what degree he thinks proper, but let him not forget continually to examine, whether in finiſhing the parts he is not deſtroying the general effect.

It were certainly a thing to be wiſhed, that all excellence were applied to illuſtrate ſubjects that were intereſting and worthy of being commemorated; whereas, of half the pictures that are in the world, the ſubject can be valued only as an occaſion which ſets the artiſt to work; and yet, the high value we ſet on ſuch pictures, without conſidering, or perhaps without knowing the ſubject, ſhews how much our attention is engaged by the art alone.

Perhaps nothing that we can ſay will ſo clearly ſhew the advantage and excellence of this faculty, as that it confers the character of Genius on works that pretend to no other merit; in which is neither expreſſion, character, or dignity, and where none are intereſted in the ſubject. We cannot refuſe the character of Genius to the marriage of Paulo Veroneſe, without oppoſing the general ſenſe of mankind, (great authorities have called it the Triumph of Painting) or, to the altar of St. Auguſtine at Antwerp, by Rubens, which equally deſerves the ſame title, and for the ſame reaſon. Neither of thoſe pictures have any intereſting ſtory to ſupport them. That of Paulo Veroneſe is only a repreſentation of a great concourſe of people at a dinner; and the ſubject of Rubens, if it may be called

a ſubject

a ſubject where nothing is doing, is an aſſembly of various Saints that lived in different ages. The whole excellence of thoſe pictures conſiſts in mechanical dexterity, working however under the influence of this comprehenſive faculty which I have ſo often mentioned.

It is by this, and this alone, that the mechanical power is ennobled and raiſed much above its natural rank. And it appears to me, that with propriety it acquires this character, as an inſtance of that ſuperiority with which mind predominates over matter, by contracting into one whole what nature has made many.

The great advantage of this idea of a whole is, that a greater quantity of truth may be ſaid to be contained and expreſſed in a few lines or touches, than in the moſt laborious finiſhing the parts where this is not regarded. It is upon this foundation that it ſtands; and the juſtneſs of the obſervation would be confirmed by the ignorant in art, if it were poſſible to take their opinions unſeduced by ſome falſe idea of what they imagine they ought to ſee in a Picture. As it is an art, they think they ought to be pleaſed in proportion as they ſee that art oſtentatiouſly diſplayed; they will, from this ſuppoſition, prefer neatneſs, high-finiſhing,

and

and gaudy colouring, to the truth, ſimplicity, and unity of nature. Perhaps too, the totally ignorant beholder, like the ignorant artiſt, cannot comprehend a whole, nor even what it means. But if falſe notions do not anticipate their perceptions, they who are capable of obſervation, and who, pretending to no ſkill, look only ſtrait forward, will praiſe and condemn in proportion as the Painter has ſucceeded in the effect of the whole. Here general ſatisfaction or general diſlike, though perhaps deſpiſed by the Painter as proceeding from the ignorance of the principles of art, yet may help to regulate his conduct, and bring back his attention to that which ought to be his principal object, and from which he has deviated for the ſake of minuter beauties.

An inſtance of this right judgment I once ſaw in a child, in going through a gallery where there were many portraits of the laſt age, which, though neatly put out of hand, were very ill put together. The child paid no attention to the neat finiſhing, or naturalneſs of any bit of drapery, but appeared to obſerve only the ungracefulneſs of the figures, and put herſelf in the poſture of every figure which ſhe ſaw in a forced aukward attitude. The cenſure of nature, uninformed, faſtened upon

the greateſt fault that could be in a picture, becauſe it related to the character and management of the whole.

I SHOULD be ſorry, if what has been ſaid ſhould be underſtood to have any tendency to encourage that careleſsneſs which leaves works in an unfiniſhed ſtate. I commend nothing for the want of exactneſs; I mean to point to that kind of exactneſs which is the beſt, and which is alone truly to be ſo eſteemed.

So far is my diſquiſition from giving countenance to idleneſs, that there is nothing in our art which enforces ſuch continual exertion and circumſpection. It requires much ſtudy and much practice; it requires the Painter's *whole* attention; whereas the parts may be finiſhed by nice touches, while his mind is engaged on other matters; he may even hear a play or a novel read without much diſturbance. The artiſt, who flatters his own indolence, will continually find himſelf evading this laborious attention, and applying his thoughts to the eaſe and lazineſs of finiſhing the parts.

No work can be too much finiſhed, provided the diligence employed be directed to its proper object; but I have

have obſerved, that an exceſſive labour in the detail has, nine times in ten, been pernicious to the general effect, even when it has been the work of great maſters. It indicates a bad choice, which is an ill ſetting out in any undertaking.

To give a right direction to your induſtry has been my principal purpoſe in this diſcourſe. It is this, which I am confident often makes the difference between two Students of equal capacities, and of equal induſtry. Whilſt the one is employing his labour on minute objects of little conſequence, the other is acquiring the art, and perfecting the habit, of ſeeing nature in an extenſive view, in its proper proportions, and its due ſubordination of parts.

Before I conclude, I muſt make one obſervation ſufficiently connected with the preſent ſubject.

The ſame extenſion of mind which gives the excellence of Genius to the theory and mechanical practice of the art, will direct him likewiſe in the method of ſtudy, and give him the ſuperiority over thoſe who narrrowly follow a more confined track of partial imitation. Whoever, in

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order to finiſh his education, ſhould travel to Italy, and ſpend his whole time there only in copying pictures, meaſuring ſtatues or buildings, (though theſe things are not to be neglected) would return with little improvement. He that imitates the Iliad, ſays Dr. Young, is not imitating Homer. It is not by laying up in the memory the particular details of any of the great works of art that any man becomes a great artiſt, if he ſtops without making himſelf maſter of the general principles on which theſe works are conducted. If he even hopes to rival thoſe whom he admires, he muſt conſider their works as the means of teaching him the true art of ſeeing nature. When this is acquired, he then may be ſaid to have appropriated their powers, or at leaſt the foundation of their powers, to himſelf; the reſt muſt depend upon his own induſtry and application. The great buſineſs of ſtudy is to form a *mind*, adapted and adequate to all times and all occaſions, to which all nature is then laid open, and which may be ſaid to poſſeſs the key of her inexhauſtible riches.

THE END.

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